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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

## **Healing Binaries: Retrieving Ancient Near Eastern Goddess Traditions for Christian Spirituality**

Kristin Kissell

**Abstract:** This work addresses the question of what we can learn about body, gender, and sexuality from ancient Near Eastern goddess traditions in order to subvert binaries of body/spirit and male/female in Christianity. The methodology used is a feminist and comparative. Beginning with an analytic account of body in the context of antiquity and today, I highlight the importance of understanding body personification in different times and spaces; emphasizing the need to continually hold the body, embodiment, and experience in tension and mystery rather than certainty and categorization. I seek to expose the damage such binaries, language, and categorization inflict upon all persons, particularly women. Ancient Near Eastern people knew the importance of both feminine and masculine energy. Unfortunately, our Western culture has been molded primarily through masculine logic and reason. The idea that the feminine is less than divine leaves women feeling shamed and striving toward unrealistic perfection in a world that continually says they are not enough, and their sexuality is less than sacred. Deconstructing the language and assumptions made about goddess traditions is vital in order to reconstruct an honoring and empowering divine feminine spirituality. A retrieval of two ancient goddess hymns is a way to re-imagine and move beyond dualism. The result is a more robust, holistic, and embodied Christian spirituality that celebrates both divine masculine and divine feminine. By retrieving hymns to the goddess and uncovering hidden jewels of the divine feminine within the biblical text, women and those who resonate with the feminine energy can find strength, compassion, and divinity in their own image. The newly exposed divine feminine biblical texts, along with the ancient Near Eastern goddess hymns, can enter into dialogue with androcentric Christian traditions expanding and deepening our understanding of who Creator is.

**Keywords:** Body, Spirit, Divine Feminine, Ancient Near East Goddess, Inana, Ishtar, *Nephesh*

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*In the past four thousand years the profound mystery of life-giving, the potential of the female to re-create herself in her own image...has been denigrated to the hands of a group of elite males. We count on representatives of male Gods to guide our spiritual lives. It is encouraging to speculate that the broken link is being repaired. Women are making spiritual room for themselves separate from official centers, in their own homes, creating autonomous religious practices in common with their very ancient ancestors. It is for women to reclaim their heritage: divinity in their own image, their separate spiritual/ritual space, and control of their own bodies.<sup>1</sup>*

In the fall of 2018, my faculty mentor, Dr. Tracy Tiemeier, and I were awarded the James L. Fredericks Comparative Theology Fellowship. The fellowship promotes visionary research in comparative theology to enhance inter-religious dialogue by inquiring into two religious traditions. My research has been centered on answering the question, in what ways might the divine feminine in ancient Near Eastern goddess traditions help subvert the entrenched binary of body vs. spirit in Christianity. My research offers an analytic account of the mind/body and male/female splits in Christian thought and practice, which further solidified an anti-female (anti-divine feminine) worldview. It exposes the damage that such binaries inflict upon all persons, in particularly women. This project proposes a critical retrieval of ancient Near Eastern approaches to the divine feminine as a way to re-imagine and integrate body with spirit, male with female, and the divine masculine with the divine feminine.

Careful attention has been given throughout this analysis as to refrain from idealizing and romanticizing goddess worship in the ancient Near East. Also, I do not seek to idealize the divine feminine over the divine masculine; rather, my research aims to awaken the divine feminine that has been denied and buried, to embrace her, and to eventually transcend beyond dualities of mind/body, body/spirit, and male/female. As with all theological research and inquiry, it is important to consider each text that I have researched and brought to this work within the context of its own time, space, and surrounding/framing/embedded ideologies. The following textual analysis explores body/spirit and gender and sexuality from goddess worship in Mesopotamian culture. It specifically looks at what can be learned in order to awaken to the beauty and profound mystery of what it means to embody the divine feminine for any person.

The methodology used is feminist and comparative. I have conducted biblical, archaeological, and historical analyses in order to bring together Christian sources with ancient Near Eastern goddess traditions. As I am using ancient sources in my comparative work, there are unique questions and concerns that must be tended to in order to conduct a respectful, feminist retrieval. I do not want to erase the sources through an overly romantic and/or uncritical approach. As a result, I am careful to see the ancient Near Eastern goddess traditions as living, complex, and even sometimes problematic traditions. I approach the ancient Near Eastern goddess traditions as a “thou” to which I am responsible, and not as an “it” to plunder for my own goals. Balancing this responsibility to the “other” with my own liberative interest for retrieval is part of the constructive project of cooperation, relationship, and healing spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> Savina J. Teubal, “The Rise and Fall of Female Reproductive Control as Seen Through Images of Women,” in *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 301.

By doing so, a more robust, holistic, and embodied Christian spirituality that journeys with religious others in a celebration of both the divine masculine and the divine feminine can take place. Retrieving the non-dualistic nature of the goddess in the ancient Near East is a significant step in the task of creating a healthy and holistic spirituality for Christians. By understanding the importance of the goddess within Mesopotamian culture, we can begin to ask different questions of the ancient Israelite context and therefore the biblical text. Within the biblical text, the feminine resides and remains. She survives in and throughout the text waiting for those who will see beyond the constructs given to her.

Body, gender, and sexuality in antiquity were understood and expressed quite differently than they are today. Dichotomies did not exist. Even for the ancient Israelites and within the Hebrew bible, there was not a split between body and soul. A disembodied self would not have been understood by the ancient peoples. Spirituality, sexuality, body, and soul were all part of the whole of human life, experience, and existence. *Lev*, the Hebrew word for heart, was understood as being part of the body that was home to understanding, reason, and wisdom. Another important Hebrew word to note is *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is often translated to soul. However, it is not the disembodied, immaterial soul that is often thought of today. For the ancient Israelites, *nephesh* was the interconnection of body, mind, heart, and organs, and the breath flowing through the whole of our being in the here and now. *Nephesh* was fluid and ever flowing.<sup>2</sup> The body, including heart, mind, and soul, or *nephesh*, was wild in nature and could not be contained or pinned down.

Language can be used to contain and enslave a person or concept, or to empower and give them wings to soar. Much of our religious language has been used to contain and enslave the divine feminine. As much as body and experience is dependent upon context, so too is language in its own time and space. Being aware of the language used to describe body, embodiment, and experience in the ancient Near East is crucial. Many terms that have been placed on goddesses, goddess traditions, and priestesses are quite problematic, specifically the terms and perceptions associated with prostitutes and whores.

The priestesses' active sexuality held a very different meaning for ancient Near Eastern cultures. Ancient Sumeria treated sex as a "complex and pleasurable activity, which was also spiritually and physically beneficial...copulation was an act far more important than mere carnal gratification or the urge to preserve the species. The notion of sex as a sin is entirely absent."<sup>3</sup> Sex and sexuality was sacred and pleasurable. Spirituality and sexuality were deeply intertwined with the capacity to "unblock the flow of energies essential to the divine creative function."<sup>4</sup> They were not simply for procreation. Therefore, terms such as *prostitute* and *whore* are problematic when speaking of the goddess, the priestesses, and the divine feminine, because they are out of context for the given time and space. When we speak of these entities as prostitutes

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff Benner, "Hebrew Word Definitions." Ancient Hebrew. [http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/vocabulary\\_definitions\\_soul.html](http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/vocabulary_definitions_soul.html) (accessed March 1, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Shahrugh Husain, *The Goddess: Power, Sexuality, and the Feminine Divine* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 94.

<sup>4</sup> Shahrugh Husain, *The Goddess: Power, Sexuality, and the Feminine Divine* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 50.

and whores, their female bodies and experiences become demonized and sexualized. Prostitutes and whores, as terms and identifiers, have been used in order to separate sexuality that is seen as profane in the eyes of certain male authoritarian figures throughout Christian history. By demonizing goddess and the priestesses, we demonize the divine feminine and therefore all women.

Much of our association of the goddess and her followers with fertility cults, and our language in reference to priestesses, have come from Western archaeological analyses of Mesopotamian excavation sites, conducted by men. Zainab Bahrani makes the argument that rather than understanding the visuals we have inherited of the ancient Near Eastern people as being truly and accurately representative of those people, we must instead consider how gendered tropes, normative gender, and sexuality are constructed.<sup>5</sup> We must learn to be comfortable with ambiguity and hold tension between our own contexts and ideologies and those of a past people. In particular, we must learn to value the mystery and surprises of the feminine.

Body and gender constructs are specific to time and space.<sup>6</sup> Maier makes a distinction between Western concepts of future and ancient Near Eastern concepts of future. Western thought and body personification see future facing forward, “in front of,” and the past behind, “in back of.” For the ancient Israelites, the reverse was true. The ancient Israelites moved forward by honoring their past. They held their past in front of them while the future propelled them forward from behind,<sup>7</sup> which is a challenging concept for our contemporary ears. This exemplifies the need to clarify contexts of body, personification, and space, rather than projecting our own gendered tropes and body norms onto a people of the past. Maier also makes the point that there is a continual tension with the body, ways of embodiment, and experience when it comes to language, categorizing, and discourse. She notes, “It is not appropriate to impose the current body/soul dualism on biblical texts and concepts.”<sup>8</sup> Our goal is to learn how to hold the many facets of the divine feminine with great care, recognizing that language alone is not sufficient to express the fullness of the body, embodiment, and experiences of all persons. Our words, categories, and contexts are powerful, and the feminine holds within herself all aspects of divine being. The ancient people understood the divine feminine power and mystery. They were able to hold the many facets of the divine feminine in their love and worship of the goddess.

By recognizing the holistic view of persons in the biblical text and understanding the anthropological and cosmological views of the ancient Near East through the goddess, a rejection of created binaries in favor of fluidity and mystery can occur. The following are two selections from hymns of praise of the goddesses, Inana and Ishtar. The first is in praise of the Mesopotamian goddess, Ishtar:

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<sup>5</sup> Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 140.

<sup>6</sup> Further investigation of gender binaries as constructs and performative energies see Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 27.

She is the joyous one, clad in loveliness,  
She is adorned with allure, appeal, charm.  
Istar is the joyous one, clad in loveliness,  
She is adorned with allure, appeal, charm.

In Her lips she is sweetness, vitality her mouth,  
While on her features laughter bursts to bloom.  
She is proud of the love charms set on her head,  
Fair her hues, full ranging, and lustrous her eyes.

She behaves unreasoningly,  
In her form she (might),  
She makes many cries for battle,  
She is adorned with awesomeness,  
I-in her onslaught she is terrible,  
She is (mur)derous, bullying, vicious.<sup>9</sup>

The beauty and challenge of the select text sheds light upon the profound mystery and wisdom of the Mesopotamians' view of the feminine. The feminine and masculine deities all held varying qualities- not one deity held all. The hymn to Ishtar is an example and reminder that all people have the capacity for sweetness and viciousness. All people are beautiful and have the capacity to create beauty and to destroy. Men were not viewed as being more righteous and morally aligned than women. Neither were they viewed as strictly warriors, making the battle cry. The gods and goddesses all partook in the various aspects of life, which reflected the social reality of the people.

Inanna, the Sumerian goddess, was known as the "Queen of Heaven." The great hymns of Inanna were composed and written by a well-educated high priestess, who wrote "The Exaltation of Inanna" out of her love for the goddess. The fact that an ancient text, written by a well-educated woman, actually survived throughout history and made its way to us today, is impressive and rare. Furthermore, it is a sign of the power of the goddess and the love that she inspires. She can never be hidden, burned, buried, and written out of history.

Inanna stood on her own and in equal ranks to the Sumerian god, An. Her power and grandeur as the "Queen of Heaven" can be understood from the following hymn of praise:

Without you no destiny at all is determined,  
To run, to escape, to quiet and to pacify are yours, Inanna.  
To open up roads and paths, a place of peace for the journey, a  
companion for the weak, are yours, Inanna.  
To keep paths and ways in good order, to shatter earth and to  
make it firm are yours, Inanna.  
To destroy, to build up, to tear out and to settle are yours,  
Inanna.

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1995), 238-239.



To turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man are yours,  
Inanna.  
Assigning virility, dignity, guardian angels, protective deities  
and cult centers are yours, Inanna.  
...mercy and pity are yours, Inanna.<sup>10</sup>

Inanna is praised for her abilities to create and destroy, to provide and take away, and to turn man into woman and woman into man. Inanna is the people's companion on their journeys, providing a place of rest and peace, and is kind and merciful towards her people.

The hymn to Inanna and the hymn to Ishtar both show the depth of admiration for and complexities of the divine feminine. The goddesses are ascribed a sense of authority and protection for their people. They are responsible for the gifts of life and rebirth, as well as the destruction and chaos that make renewal possible. Gender fluidity is explicit in the hymn to Inanna and implicit in the hymn to Ishtar. Both goddess reflect the many cycles and aspects of life. The goddess Ishtar is described as having a great capacity for destruction and death. There is no mention of mercy within her hymn of praise. Rather, mercy and compassion are notions described as being blessings from the goddess Inanna. Inanna is described as having strength and dignity. There is a sense of peace and calmness associated with her. The hymn to Inanna resembles a poem written for a lover, while the hymn to Ishtar is more staccato like and direct.

While there is beauty and awesomeness in each hymn, the hymn of praise to Ishtar can be seen as challenging and problematic. A potential misinterpretation can be made that reinforces gendered notions of women as either sweet, full of life, or destructive and violent; it can be read as a claim that women respond from emotions only, rather than reason. However, by using a comparison and reading Ishtar's hymn side by side with Inanna's, we can begin to understand that there is a depth and breadth to the ancient Near Eastern way of understanding the divine feminine. She is sweet and compassionate but also destructive and violent. She is life, death, and renewal. She is chaos and order. In fact, the sense of fear elicited from Ishtar's hymn has resonance with the fear the ancient Israelites had for Yahweh. And for clarification of language, *fear* in the Hebrew context has many meanings, including and primarily great reverence. The ancient Near Eastern people did in fact have a great reverence for their goddesses. Inanna and Ishtar were all things for their people. The goddesses were protector, warrior, life giver, and nurturer, as well as compassionate, beautiful, and radiant. Harris states it simply, "Inanna-Ishtar was a paradox; that is, she embodied within herself polarities and contraries, and thereby she transcended them. She was a deity...who confounded and confused normative categories and boundaries."<sup>11</sup>

What is the significance then of the goddess for us today? The ancient Near Eastern people lived a fluid, complex life which is reflected in the hymns to the goddesses. The divine

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<sup>10</sup> Joan G. Westenholz, "Inanna and Ishtar in the Babylonian World," in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Leick, Gwendolyn (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 337-338.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on why the goddess was attributed with paradoxical traits and the theological significance can be found in Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30 (1991): 261-278, accessed May 4, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062957> which illustrates how we might understand paradoxes and heal binaries today.

feminine was neither a virgin figure nor a harlot. She was all encompassing. She cried out in battle for her people and made open paths for them to follow. She was a companion for the weak and brought her people to lie in peaceful green pastures. For the pastures, the temple, and the ritual space were in her keeping. Strength, dignity, and vitality were hers.

The goddess, as the divine feminine, is with us today and can be an inspiration for creating an embodied spirituality for Christian persons, especially women. Her reverence was not and is not based on male/female and body/spirit dichotomies. In fact, her reverence resides and remains within the biblical text. She is the life force, Elat (Goddess) with El (God), in Genesis. She is the tree of life in Proverbs. She is wisdom and *nephesh*. She is within the anti-goddess rhetoric. She is the mercy and peace of Christ. She is the strength of Mary and the women at the foot of the cross. It is for us to look beyond the ancient Israelites to understand the history they came from, as well as what shaped the culture around them. It is for us to ask deeper questions of the biblical text.

Understanding the anthropological and cosmological view of the ancient Near East can be a catalyst for much needed change that benefits all persons, specifically by rejecting binaries and dichotomies in favor of fluidity and interdependent arising. Rita Gross states, "it is better to remain fluid and with an openness of interdependent arising out of basic space than to solidify self and other by reifying them."<sup>12</sup> The divine feminine and the divine masculine live within each of our beings arising together as *nephesh*. The ancient Near Eastern people understood interdependent arising and lived their life in that way. The question remains, are we able to fully embody and embrace interdependent arising by giving the divine feminine an equal place at the altar.

In "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation," womanist theologian Delores S. Williams states,

... establishing a continuity of tradition about God involves uncovering female-centered traditions buried beneath the layers of androcentric cultural traditions. The newly exposed tradition enters into dialogue with the prevailing and prominent androcentric cultural patterns or traditions and becomes a source for enlarging the community's understanding of the many ways God does and has related to the world-including the many ways God relates to the particular community itself.<sup>13</sup>

By understanding the ways in which the ancient people interacted with the Goddess and how the Goddess related to her people, Christian and Jewish women can feel empowered to embrace the divine feminine within and retrieve the brilliance of their bodies as temples of the Spirit. As a ripple effect, the communities that women find themselves in will also experience an expanded understanding of Creator. The honoring of and great reverence held for women within the biblical text can be reclaimed. The divine feminine survives within the biblical text waiting to be uncovered, rediscovered, and fully named. A tendency in Christianity is to conflate the goddess with the masculine God by melting her away into the one, true God. Her attributes becoming the feminine qualities of that God. The problem with continually ascribing feminine qualities to God

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<sup>12</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Religious Diversity: What's the Problem?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 123.

<sup>13</sup> Delores S. Williams, "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 175.



is that God is almost always called *father*, especially in worship. Thus mother, Goddess, and the divine feminine are displaced and hidden behind God in the shadows, when in reality they are equal in their ranking next to father, God, and the divine masculine. Another beautiful Akkadian hymn of praise to the goddess shows the ancient Near Eastern people's knowledge and need of the feminine and masculine dance of leadership together:

The goddess-counsel is with her.  
She holds the destinies of everything in her hand.  
At her glance happiness is engendered,  
Dignity, splendor, a protective spirit and guardian.

She is the one whose position is foremost among the gods,  
Her word is respected, it prevails over them/theirs,  
Ishtar, whose position is foremost among the gods,  
Her word is respected, it prevails over them/theirs.

She is their queen, they discuss her utterances,  
All of them kneel before her.  
They receive her in her luminescence,  
Women and men fear her.

In their assembly, her speaking is pre-eminent, supreme,  
She is seated with them as an equal to Anu, their king.  
She is wise with regard to terms of understanding, knowledge, and insight.  
They confer together (about decisions), she and her householder.

They occupy the dais together,  
In the sanctuary, the abode of jubilations.  
The gods appear before them,  
Their (i.e. the gods') ears are attentive to their (i.e. Ishtar's and Anu's) command.<sup>14</sup>

The goddess-counsel is with her. She is their queen. Ishtar (the divine feminine) and Anu (the divine masculine) respectfully and lovingly occupy the dais together.

As the ancient Near Eastern texts show a complexity of the divine feminine, so too does the biblical text. Where is this goddess within the biblical text? What forms, elements, and language does she reside within? What is borrowed from or connected to the ancient Near East? She is within Esther, Ruth, the book of Wisdom, and the tree of life in Proverbs. Queen Vashti is the goddess's embodiment in the book of Esther, saying no to her husband's egotistical desire to parade her naked beauty for others. In Lamentations, goddess is mother and daughter Zion crying out for their people who are desolate, abused, and abandoned. The Song of Solomon exalts her beauty and prominence. Samuel's rule and ego is threatened by foreign deities and "Astartes," figurines of the goddess used in ancient rituals. Goddess is powerful, mysterious, and profound. She cannot be contained.

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<sup>14</sup> Alan Lenzi, "An OB Royal Hymn to Ishtar," in *Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: A Reader*, ed. Alan Lenzi, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 126-127.

Let us take a closer look at the empowering words expressing the divine feminine within the biblical text that have a resonance with the goddess hymns of the ancient Near East:

Happy are those who find wisdom,  
and those who get understanding,  
for her income is better than silver,  
and her revenue is better than gold.  
She is more precious than jewels,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her.  
Long life is in her right hand;  
in her left hand are riches and honor.  
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,  
and all her paths are peace.  
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;  
those who hold her fast are called happy.  
(Proverbs 3: 13-18, NRSV)

Goddess is seen and heard within Proverbs and can be compared with the Akkadian hymn of praise to the goddess, along with the hymn of praise to Inanna. Proverbs acknowledges that wisdom and understanding are hers. The Akkadian hymn speaks of the goddess counsel and of the goddess' understanding, knowledge, and word being respected above all others. Nothing can compare to her wisdom, beauty, and peace within the Akkadian hymn and in Proverbs. There is an implicit sense of protection ascribed to her in Proverbs, where she is depicted as a protector of those who hold steadfast to her. Such protection is explicitly stated in the Akkadian hymn. The hymn of praise to Inanna calls attention to the goddess' paths of peace, which we hear echoed in Proverbs. Those who hold tight to Inanna and wisdom in Proverbs are filled with joy and pleasantness. Across all three groups of text – the Akkadian hymn, Proverbs, and the hymns of praise to Inanna and Ishtar – there is a sense of great beauty and wide-reaching protection for all who cling to goddess. She is truly the tree of life.<sup>15</sup>

We continue to see Goddess's beauty reflected in the alluring words of Solomon:

How graceful are your feet in sandals,  
O queenly maiden!  
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,  
the work of a master hand.  
Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine.  
Your belly is a heap of wheat,  
encircled with lilies.  
Your two breasts are like two fawns,  
twins of a gazelle.

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<sup>15</sup> In the ancient Near East the goddess was depicted as a tree, branches sprouting from her being. The ancient Near Eastern people connected goddess and trees with vegetation and fertility of the land, nourishment for all. How can this information be used to reinterpret the story of Adam and Eve? For more information see Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 28.



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Your next is like an ivory tower.  
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,  
by the gate of Bath-rabbim.  
Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon,  
overlooking Damascus.  
Your head crowns you like Carmel,  
and your flowing locks are like purple;  
a king is held captive in the tresses.  
(Song of Solomon 7: 1-5, NRSV)

The beauty of the goddess and the great reverence that people held for her can be observed within the Song of Solomon, which echoes the hymn of praise to Ishtar. Each part of the goddess, of the woman, is described as glorious. Imagine what a world it would be if women embraced their beauty and sensuality in such a way. Imagine what a world it would be if men saw every woman in this way. Imagine what a world it would be if we all saw each other as royal jewels. Within the depth of admiration of the Song of Solomon and the hymn of praise to Ishtar, there is a strength and sense of empowerment that is being recognized and named. Women can hold tight to their beauty and uniqueness, their jewels, knowing that there is authority within their own divine being.

A woman within the biblical text that knows her beauty and holds tight to her own divine authority is Queen Vashti in the book of Esther. The king demands that Queen Vashti appear before himself and his men wearing only a crown so that the officials and people can see how beautiful she is.. She refuses and the king becomes enraged. The officials fear that the Queen's behavior will spread throughout the land and that the women will "look with contempt on their husbands," and "will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath" (Esther 1: 10-18, NRSV). Queen Vashti becomes a ghost for the remainder of the narrative, never to be heard from again. However, her "no" and refusal resound across the centuries as we uncover and retrieve her voice once again. Her no is powerful – it is the goddess Ishtar's cry for battle against a man who wishes to use her body for his own egotistical purposes. Queen Vashti knows she her worth and her beauty. Her refusal of the king is seen as unreasonable and unacceptable by the eunuchs. The men know her words are respected by the women they rule, and they fear the wrath that will ensue as a result of her refusal. This is similarly described in the Akkadian hymn of praise and hymn to the goddess Ishtar.

Another woman who is unafraid and powerful, is Jezebel. She makes a cry for battle against Elijah after he has slaughtered her people. Jezebel is the protector, the goddess within each hymn of praise. She is only a harlot to men who fear her wrath and power. Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (1 Kings 19: 1-2, NRSV).

The goddess is also seen in Maacah (1 Kings 15:11-14, NRSV). Maacah is known as the queen mother. The queen mother was the woman who embodied the goddess, looked after the temple, took care of her household, and performed rituals in the ancient Near East. Macaah was revered until her son, Asa, felt the threat of losing his kingdom and the Lord's favor. He removed

Maacah and burned her Asherah,<sup>16</sup> a figurine depicting the goddess that was used in rituals and placed in home altars. According to the biblical text, Asa had done right in the eyes of God just as his father, David, had by removing Maacah and burning the goddess figurine. The main point is that the goddess remains within the biblical text, even in the anti-goddess rhetoric.

Goddess and the divine feminine continue to reside within the New Testament, as well. We can see the divine feminine in Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene. Mother Mary is strong, spirited, and full of life. In ancient Near Eastern goddess worship, the womb was revered. In many depictions of the goddess, fruit branches were shown as growing out from her limbs and womb. We hear the echo of the goddess in connection to fruit trees and life in our present-day prayer when we proclaim, “Blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” Mother Mary is mother goddess. Mary is one of the only prophets to fully say “yes” to God.. In the Hebrew Bible we read multiple stories of prophets running away from, hiding from, and cursing God. Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Job all did these things. In comparison, Mary displays humility coupled with strength in her full-bodied yes to the divine. She does not run, hide, or curse what befalls her in life. She is Goddess incarnate.

The other important New Testament woman to highlight, who embodies the divine feminine, is Mary Magdalene. In the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John, Christ appears to Mary Magdalene and the women saying, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Mt. 28: 9-10). Theologian James Martin, S.J., acknowledges and proclaims Mary Magdalene’s rightful place as the “Apostles to the apostles.” He states in a recent social media post, “Mary Magdalene was the church on earth. Because, at this point in salvation history, especially as recounted in John’s Gospel, only to her had the full Paschal Mystery been revealed.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus reveals himself first to Mary and commissions the women to go out and spread the good news. We can see how Mary Magdalene embodies the goddess when we look back at the Akkadian hymn of praise that states, “The goddess-counsel is with her. She holds the destinies of everything in her hand.”<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene holds Christ’s counsel and teaching. She holds the destiny of Christ’s resurrection and all of our salvation within her being. Just as Mother Mary fully accepts her call from God, so too does Mary Magdalene accept hers from Christ. Mary Magdalene does not doubt anything – she goes straight away to share the good news with the disciples, who are afraid to be seen and hiding behind closed doors. The Goddess, the divine feminine, does not hide from her calling and rightful place. She is out in the mystery of the world and can be found embracing the incarnate God in her daily life.

From Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, we see the goddess’s qualities of wisdom, reason, understanding, strength, and beauty, which resonate with what we find in the hymn of praise to Inanna and the Akkadian hymn of praise. The strength, protective attributes, and power of Ishtar reside in Queen Vashti, Jezebel, and Macaah. Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene are

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<sup>16</sup> For more information of the importance of Asherah figurines in the ancient Near East see Carl Olson, *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1983), 73.

<sup>17</sup> James Martin, S.J., 2019, “Mary Magdalene,” Instagram photo, April 22, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/jamesmartinsj/?hl=en>.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Lenzi, “An OB Royal Hymn to Ishtar,” in *Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: A Reader*, ed. Alan Lenzi, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 126-127.

not two sides of the same coin who are at opposite ends of the female spectrum. They both hold the many attributes of the divine feminine within them and they are both Godly.

This analysis and retrieval has only just begun to scratch the surface of how exploration of Goddess and the divine feminine within the biblical text can awaken us to Mother God's call. A larger investigation would also explore Jesus as wisdom incarnate, and look into the ways that God, featured as mother, lies at the center of the Christian faith. It would also explore the masculinization of Lady Wisdom after the Romanization of the early Christians. It is time for women to reclaim Lady Wisdom as our own, recognizing and honoring the body and our innate intuition as wisdom from God.

It should also be noted that there are the limitations within this current work that can only be overcome with the help of embodied spirituality, education, and authentic dialogue between Jewish and Christian women. Despite my initial intended audience being Jewish and Christian people who want to expand and improve their spiritualities, I have primarily connected the history and context of goddess worship in the ancient Near East to Christian biblical texts. A future extension of this project must bring in specific Jewish texts as well.

Another limitation that must be addressed in future work for Christians women, is Jesus' maleness in connection with goddess and divine feminine spirituality. Judaism's monotheistic God has also limited the way that Jewish people speak about goddess and divine feminine spirituality. This monotheistic God is a unique and beautiful part of Judaism, which Christianity would not exist without. Still, this God-image has historically been limiting for women, and we must find away to preserve God while enriching, enlarging, and expanding our notion of the divine. As a feminist, comparative theologian, I see moving toward an embodied theology as key. We also must create a space for Jewish and Christian people to come together and share the spiritualities, ritual practices, and texts that give Mother God a voice.

Within the hymns to the goddesses Ishtar and Inanna, and the biblical texts that contain hidden jewels of the divine feminine, women and those who resonate with the feminine energy can find strength, compassion, and divinity in their own image. Biblical historian Savina J. Teubal writes, "It is for women to reclaim their heritage: divinity in their own image, their separate spiritual/ritual space, and control of their own bodies."<sup>19</sup> The Divine Feminine awaits those who will once again hold tight to her and awaken to her presence through the biblical text and their own interior spirituality.<sup>20</sup> The divine feminine within the biblical texts and ancient Near Eastern goddess hymns can enter into dialogue with our present-day androcentric traditions and expand and deepen our understandings of who the Creator is.

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<sup>19</sup> Savina J. Teubal, "The Rise and Fall of Female Reproductive Control as Seen Through Images of Women," in *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 301.

<sup>20</sup> Future comparisons for further theological research is needed between Akkadian and Sumerian hymns with the biblical text in order to understand more fully the culture and belief systems of the Mesopotamians and Israelites. More hymns and songs of lament can be found within Alan Lenzi, "An OB Royal Hymn to Ishtar," in *Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: A Reader*, ed. Alan Lenzi, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 126-127.



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